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SUBJECT: POVERTY AND INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE HAMPER  
BOTSWANA'S DRIVE TOWARD UNIVERSAL EDUCATION

REF: GABORONE 1113

1. Summary: The Government of Botswana has made significant headway since independence in achieving its goal of providing universal education to its people, but inadequate infrastructure and poverty impede further progress. High rates of poverty and unemployment (reftel), particularly in rural areas, mean parents face challenges in getting their children to school, paying for uniforms and meals, and in making the choice to sacrifice their children's labor on family farms in exchange for an education. Lack of sufficient classroom space, toilets, administration buildings, staff housing, and basic services such as electricity also continue to hamper the government's efforts. While a high incidence of absenteeism, seasonally estimated in one village at nearly 50 percent, and dropouts as well as lack of employment or higher education opportunities for those who graduate exacerbate the problems faced by Botswana. End summary.

#### Public Education and School Fees

2. Public education in Botswana is free but not compulsory for students from primary through senior secondary school. Parents who are able are expected to pay ancillary fees for things such as transportation, meals and school uniforms. The children of parents registered as destitute and/or as Remote Area Dwellers, largely made up of the ethnic minority Basarwa/San people, receive school uniforms, books, housing and meals free of charge. However, many poor parents face difficulties in meeting the necessary school costs. This often impedes their ability to send their children to school.

3. To complicate this further, the MOE has announced that secondary school fees, which were abolished in the heyday of diamond revenue increases in the mid-1980s, will be reintroduced in 2006 for those able to afford them. The Minister of Education, Jacob Nkate, has said that this move is part of the government's cost-recovery strategy in the face of declining revenue and greater demands on scarce resources to deal with problems such as HIV/AIDS. The proposal has met with considerable resistance from opposition parties. According to the government-owned Daily News, the President of the Botswana Peoples Party (BPP) opined that the fees, which will be approximately USD 60-90 per annum, "would deny most Botswana children access to education as parents cannot afford to pay." Although the impact on attendance is hard to predict, this statement is an exaggeration.

#### School Infrastructure Inadequate

4. Botswana spends roughly 25 percent of its total annual budget on education, but only eight percent of its annual development budget goes to school infrastructure needs. The Senior Education Secretary in the northwestern Okavango Sub-District, Ms. Molotsi, told Econoff and Pickering Fellow (who traveled throughout rural Botswana in July) of serious infrastructure inadequacies at primary and junior secondary schools in the district. She said school construction projects have been frozen due to a lack of funding. She cited 275 toilets, 97 classrooms, 20 new administration buildings, and 128 new staff houses as the minimums needed just to meet existing requirements and national standards for the sub-district's 29 primary schools. The government faces a real problem attracting quality teachers to rural areas where staff housing and basic services like electricity and running water are inadequate. It is likely that the difficulty in attracting good quality teachers to these rural areas means the quality of education in rural areas suffers.

#### Absenteeism and Dropouts Common

5. Many people live in remote villages, and access to

secondary education is difficult. Some students live as far as 120 km from the nearest junior secondary school. While government provides hostels for some primary and secondary school students, the demand exceeds the supply. Only 5 out of 22 primary schools in Ghanzi have boarding facilities. Based on these figures, it is easy to conclude that a lack of transportation is one common reason why many students dropout of school before reaching junior or senior secondary school. But there are a wide variety of reasons for these problems.

16. The principal at a primary school in the eastern village of Nata told Econoff that because of the financial problems of parents, and the need to have their children perform basic household responsibilities, including tending cattle and sheep as well as weed whacking, the absentee rate can climb as high as 50 percent on a seasonal basis. The Senior Education Secretary in Ghanzi said that, on average, about 85 percent of school age children attended school regularly. In addition, those children who stay in school but do not pass the required examinations to enter junior and then senior secondary school often do not continue their education at alternative institutions.

#### A Second Chance for Dropout Students

17. With the absentee and dropout rates so high, there is a need for services and training for those students who are not attending school. Several NGOs have cropped up to address these issues, including Bana Ba Lesetsi in Maun, which works with dropout students and provides alternative education, and the Brigades Development Trusts of Botswana (Brigades), which offers vocational training to students who failed to reach senior secondary school. The director of Bana Ba Lesetsi, Ms. Lilian, described the circumstances of many poor dropout children as extremely difficult, facing domestic violence, drug abuse, alcoholism, social estrangement, and unemployment among their parents.

18. The Brigades, funded by a variety of sources, including the government, private donors, and donor government agencies, are spread throughout the country and teach technical skills, such as basic computer skills, animal husbandry and entrepreneurship training. The MOE is currently considering restructuring the Brigades to improve the provision of service to these dropout students. A visit to the Brigade in the southern village of Tsabong showed, however, that these institutions are severely under-funded. The Brigade in Tsabong has housing for only eight boys and eight

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girls. It trains about 30 students a year, but received applications from more than twice that many. The director of this Brigade, Mr. Dick Mweshi, told Econoff that he can accept only 50 percent of the applications due to budget constraints.

#### Education without Employment

19. Although many parents value education, the lack of opportunities to gain employment in rural areas undermines the hope for their children to move out of poverty. The Deputy Council Secretary in Tsabong said that when he graduated from the University of Botswana (UB), he already had a job lined up with the government. Today, he said, many UB graduates are returning to Tsabong without jobs, squeezing the local employment options for secondary school graduates and dropouts. The lack of employment opportunities may also be undermining the commitment of parents to sending their children to school. In Nata, the Social and Community Development Officer said that nearly 60 percent of parents are illiterate and unemployed and fail to recognize the importance of a good education for their children.

#### COMMENT

10. The social and economic difficulties of poor parents undermine the GOB's efforts to meet its education goals. With mounting national budget constraints, the government's decision to reintroduce school fees could mean a drop in attendance. The government hopes that school fees will encourage parents and teachers to take greater ownership of and interest in their education. However, in 1987, when the government abolished school fees, school enrollment rose sharply, raising concerns that the opposite will result when they are reintroduced next year. The GOB needs help in providing the infrastructure required for

its schools, the absence of which impairs the quality of education. Post is exploring options for supporting school infrastructure needs through the Office of Defense Cooperation's Humanitarian Assistance Fund.

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